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ABSTRACT

Aimed at school board members, this publication discusses the critical importance of developing an accountability system for a school district. The first chapter advises board members to balance their spending and resource allocations between equity and effectiveness. The option of greater regulatory flexibility mandates greater board responsibility for designing workable accountability systems geared toward school improvement. Boards should realize the uniqueness of each school district, the importance of setting clear goals and obtaining accurate information, and the close relationship between accountability and educational success. The second chapter introduces and defines accountability basics, such as indicators, assessment, and accountability system elements. The third chapter discusses 1980s attempts to provide indicators of educational progress, from developing "Wall Chart" statistics for each state to proposals for a national testing program. The Council of Chief State School Officers is developing a comprehensive set of indicators comprising school and postschool outcomes, school context, and school policies and practices. Chapter 4 presents sample state accountability systems, highlighting California's School Report Card, Connecticut's Common Core of Learning assessments, and South Carolina's School Incentive Rewards Program. Chapter 5 outlines some local school board accountability efforts in South Carolina, Connecticut, Kentucky, Arizona, and Tennessee. Chapter 6 outlines a process for creating a local accountability system. (9 references) (MLH)

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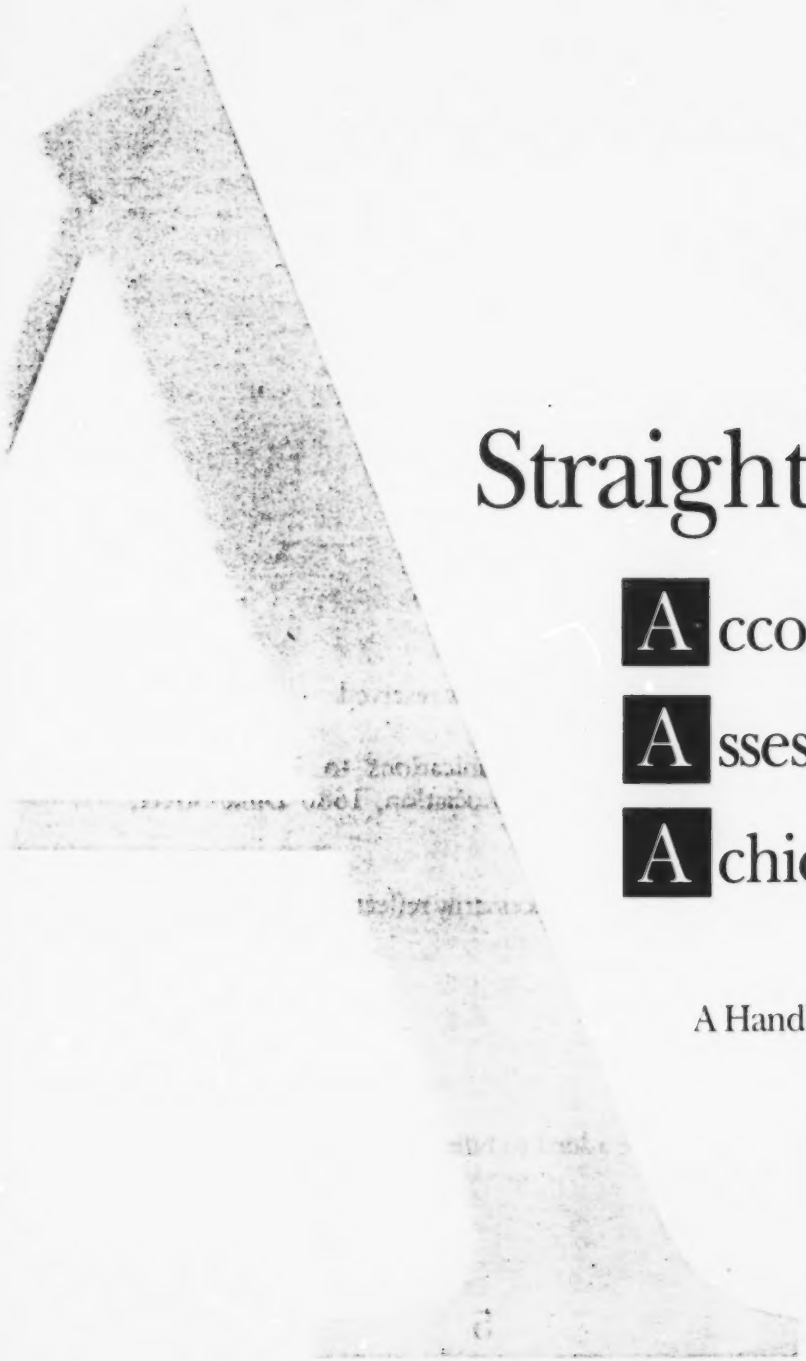

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A Handbook for School Board Members

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STRAIGHT A's: Accountability, Assessment, Achievement

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NSBA Leadership Reports, 1991-1
STRAIGHT A's: Accountability, Assessment, Achievement

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Foreword

Accountability, assessment, testing, performance—concepts that long have been familiar to local school boards—have assumed unprecedented importance as America strives to assure its leadership position in today's global economy through higher standards of learning for our children. The national education goals set out by President Bush and the nation's governors, and embraced by education policymakers and practitioners, articulate general standards for our public schools. But how we achieve these goals and how we measure our progress toward their attainment are being debated vociferously and at length in local communities, state legislatures and statehouses, the halls of federal government and other national forums.

Entrusted with the governance of public education, local school boards have worn the mantle of accountability for decades. As a school board member, however, you know that schools alone cannot realize the national goals. Many of the students who enter the school doors today need more than dedicated education policymakers, inspired and competent teachers, and capable administrators. They need services that traditionally have been, and in many cases must continue to be, delivered by other community agencies. They need their parents' support and involvement. This shared responsibility for meeting the goals we have set out for our children and our public schools means that we are all accountable for their success.

To understand more precisely how these shared responsibilities fit together, school board members need to have a working knowledge of assessment and accountability systems. They need to know how to put in place an accountability system that provides objective and accurate information on school performance. They need to know how to select appropriate indicators of success. Local school boards need to understand the different kinds of assessment tools—what they can and cannot measure. Only then can school board members inform the debate on educational assessment and accountability; only then can they persuasively advocate for improvements and resources that are needed to meet the district's — and the nation's — educational goals.

We hope that this publication, *STRAIGHT A's: Accountability, Assessment, Achievement*, will assist you in fulfilling this crucial responsibility in your governance role. You, as the preeminent education policymaker in your community, must be more than an active participant in the movement for greater accountability for, and assessment of, school performance. You must lead the way.

Very truly yours,

Martha C. Fricke
President

Thomas A. Shannon
Executive Director

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Introduction

At a time when newspapers publish school-by-school results of test scores, school board members do not need to be told that the public is demanding educational *results*. In many ways, the move toward increased accountability for public schools has defined the school reform movement for the last decade. From an increase in the number and types of standardized tests to requirements that school districts conduct—and publish—educational audits to threats of declaring some schools or districts "educationally bankrupt" to calls for a "national report card," educational accountability has become one of the most important issues confronting school boards today.

In fact, accountability has become both an educational and a political issue for many school boards. "There are many definitions of accountability. But however you define it, you'd better not say anything against it. Accountability is the flag, motherhood, and apple pie of education," observed Jessica Weber in "What School Boards Must Know About Student Test Scores," published in the New Jersey School Boards Association's May/June 1989 issue of *School Leader*.

Certainly the establishment of clear standards for learning at the local, state, or national level can provide a useful tool for local educators and communities to evaluate their schools. In addition, in a time when students and their families are increasingly mobile, and the workplace is growing increasingly technological, some common base of student knowledge is justifiable.

However, tightly drawn standard assessments can lead to a greater centralization of curriculum and reduce local control over what is taught. And, as previous assessments have consistently shown, an over-reliance on assessment can stifle innovation, diversity, and risk-taking at the local level.

This publication discusses the critical importance of developing an accountability system for a school district. It outlines some of the key terms widely used by those interested in accountability—indicators, assessment, and accountability. It highlights efforts at the federal, state, and local levels to develop accountability systems. It also provides practical advice for school board members, helping them design an accountability system that will meet their district's needs.

Chapter 1

Accountability for School Improvement

Today, schools are faced with increasing demands to provide the public with concrete examples of student achievement. Parents are asking for some evidence that their children will have the skills they need for success in later life. Business leaders are asking for proof that students now in school will have the ability to maintain our nation's international competitiveness. And the increasingly large number of taxpayers without any direct contact with public schools are asking for some indication that they are receiving a return on the dollars they have invested in education at the state and local level.

All those reasons have led to increased demands for schools to develop *accountability systems*—objective data that give some indication of the kind of job schools are doing. This chapter outlines some of the reasons why school board members should be concerned about accountability, and suggests some broad policy approaches that school boards might consider.

Why Should School Boards Be Concerned About Accountability?

There are several important reasons why school boards should be concerned about accountability. First, school boards function on behalf of the members of their communities. In a very real sense, the school board acts as a trustee of the parents and children in the community.

Second, school boards are responsible for public funds. They need to ensure that they are allocating resources in the best way. Naturally, boards seldom have sufficient resources to undertake all the worthwhile projects under consideration or desired by parents, teachers, administrators, or board members themselves. Persistent scarcity of funds, arising from the real constraints on the pocketbooks of taxpayers in most communities, restricts educational spending. School boards must therefore consider carefully any project that requires additional resources or the reallocation of existing resources.

Upon what grounds should such considerations be made? School boards usually balance their spending between two competing ideas. The first is the idea of *equity*—if public funds are spent, school board members must make every effort to ensure that the expenditure does not give an unfair advantage to one group of students over another. On the other hand, school boards must also be concerned about *effectiveness*—ensuring that students receive the maximum benefit from each dollar spent.

There is always some tension between the demands of equity and those of effectiveness. Nevertheless, school boards are constantly making strategic decisions about how to juggle scarce dollars to accomplish educational goals. Here are just some of the decisions school boards must make. Each of them might involve deciding between the demands of equity and effectiveness:

- What should be the composition of the student body in a particular school?
- What are the criteria for student success in the district—including standards for promotion from grade to grade, attendance requirements, and graduation requirements?
- What should be the goals of the instructional program?
- How much authority should local schools be given? What issues should be decided at the local school level?

Providing policymakers the information they need to make decisions that will improve education for all children is the most important reason for developing an accountability system.

Each of these decisions could have a dramatic impact on student achievement. Each could be better informed by reliable and accurate information. Providing policymakers the information they need to make decisions that will improve education for all children is the most important reason for developing an accountability system.

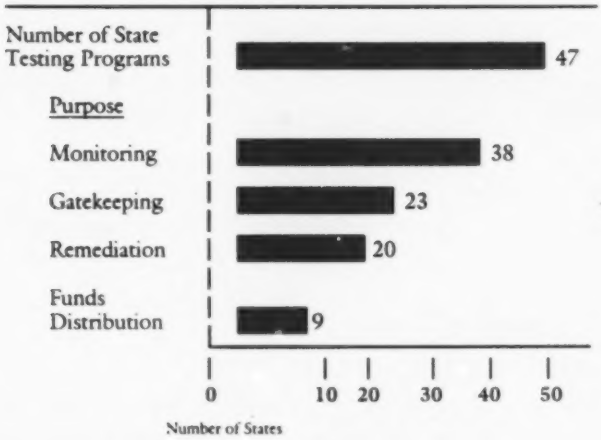
There is a third, related, reason that board mem-

bers must develop accountability systems—their responsibility to report on performance to the public. As Dale Mann, a professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, wrote in an article in *The Executive Educator*, "If we, as educators, don't deliver accountability, the public will impose it."

In fact, the public already has. At least 47 states have imposed some form of statewide testing, according to a 1990 Educational Testing Service survey. "The overwhelming purpose of state testing programs is to promote accountability," ETS noted in *ETS Policy Notes*. In fact, 38 of the 47 states use tests for monitoring the performance of schools or districts. Twenty-three require students to pass a test for grade promotion or graduation; another 20 use testing to identify students who need remedial help; nine use tests in decisions about how to distribute funds. (See Figure 1-1.)

Figure 1-1

State Testing Programs and Purposes



Source: *ETS Policy Notes*, Educational Testing Service 1990

Of course, many school boards have led the accountability movement. Because local school boards recognize that they have the primary responsibility for governing public schools and demonstrating their effectiveness, many have preferred to develop a program that assesses their district's goals.

There is a fourth reason why many school board members have renewed their interest in developing an accountability program for their district: freedom from outside regulation. As U.S. Secretary of Education Lamar Alexander observed when he was Governor of Tennessee, many states are willing to engage in "some old-fashioned horse-trading. We'll regulate less, if schools and school districts will produce better results."

Many states have instituted programs that incorporate the type of tradeoff Alexander outlined. A January 1990 article in *The Executive Educator* cited these examples:

- In South Carolina, schools that can demonstrate that their students have, over time, made substantial achievement gains, can apply for exemptions from state regulations in a number of areas—class size, structure, and scheduling, among others.
- School districts in North Carolina can request waivers from state policies under the School Improvement and Accountability Act of 1989. Districts submit plans to improve schools, as well as long- and short-term goals on which to measure progress. Along with the plans, districts can request waivers of regulations they believe will inhibit their ability to achieve their goals.
- New Jersey districts with no deficient schools receive a 5-year waiver from state monitoring, providing them considerable discretion in their programs and operations.
- The Memphis City Schools are allowing individual schools to request waivers from district regulations. Under a plan to improve education at seven inner-city schools, local school councils are required to develop plans for improvement, including how they will be monitored. In return, schools can gain exemption from certain rules and regulations.

The option of greater regulatory flexibility in exchange for more local accountability for performance makes it even more important that local school boards design accountability systems that will encourage—and document—school improvements.

The option of greater regulatory flexibility in exchange for more local accountability for performance makes it even more important that local school boards design accountability systems that will encourage—and document—school improvements.

Key Principles To Remember

There are a variety of reasons, then, why local school boards may be considering establishing an accountability program for their district. In developing a program, there are a number of key principles to keep in mind:

1. *Each school district is unique.*

Each of the more than 15,000 school districts in the United States has features that make it distinct from all the others. They serve different students, are located in communities with different economic foundations, and have teachers with different strengths and weaknesses. These unique qualities provide both opportunities ... and constraints. While the goals of one school district may be identical to those of another district, they will not necessarily follow the same road to success. School board members and the administrative team must map out a strategy for school improvement that is appropriate to the circumstances of their own district.

The first step in designing any accountability system is to establish clear goals about where the schools are headed.

2. *It's essential to set goals.*

Yogi Berra said it best: "If you don't know where you're going, you might not get there." The first step in designing any accountability system is to establish clear goals about where the schools are headed.

There are already a number of models. The National Goals for Education, which grew out of the Education Summit held by the President and the nation's Governors, outlined the direction of national educational improvement efforts. In many cases, local school boards can incorporate these goals into their own planning process. A district that has already achieved a high school graduation rate of 90 percent, for example, could involve the community in efforts to reach an even higher standard.

A second reason why goals are important, according to NSBA President Martha C. Fricke in testimony before a U.S. Senate committee considering a national report card, is that setting goals is also a way of indicating what the schools ***cannot*** do. "Certainly a priority should be given on establishing objectives which support the national goals," she said, adding a concern that assessments must not "suggest that schools can be all things to all people."

Of course, school boards know that it is often difficult not only to agree on the *goals* for education—but even on the *process* of reaching those goals. Nonetheless, the time and effort invested in developing educational goals for a school district, coupled with an accountability system to report on progress toward reaching those goals, is the best way to increase community support for the schools.

3. *It's hard to make good decisions with bad information.*

When school boards receive information that is accurate, timely, well organized, and properly analyzed, they are better able to use that information to make decisions that are appropriate for their school district. Thus, school boards committed to accountability prefer information that is valid, reliable, and accurate to information that artificially makes the school district look good.

School boards that use information for accountability believe that providing information to the community about the district's performance is an obligation.

4. *Accountability systems promote education success.*

School boards that encourage accountability believe in information. They promote a managerial climate committed to nationally recognized performance norms. Here are some of the ways in which accountability systems can lead to education success:

- Accountability can increase public support for education.

  School boards that use information for accountability believe that providing informa-

APPROACHES TO ACCOUNTABILITY

Although "accountability" has in many cases become synonymous with "standardized testing," there are actually a number of accountability systems a school district can consider. A 1990 U.S. Department of Education publication written by Michael W. Kirst, *Accountability: Implications for State and Local Policymakers*, outlines six broad approaches:

- Accountability through performance reporting;
- Accountability through monitoring and compliance with standards or regulations;
- Accountability through incentive systems;
- Accountability through reliance on the market;
- Accountability through changing the locus of authority or control of schools;
- Accountability through changing professional roles.

Accountability as performance reporting. This approach includes such techniques as statewide assessment, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), and performance indicators. It is in some ways, Kirst suggests, similar to the audit report in business: "Performance reports assume that information per se will stimulate actions to improve education. An aroused parent group, for example, will follow up on the results of a negative school report card by lobbying the school board for a new principal." On the state level, performance reporting might monitor state requirements such as minimum graduation requirements. This is the approach to accountability that received the primary emphasis during the past decade.

Accountability through monitoring and compliance with standards or regulations. The most typical example of this approach to accountability is in legal issues, such as ensuring due process rights of handicapped students. Monitoring and compliance can also include audits, such as budget reviews. The key element in this approach is its focus on *procedural* compliance. Prominent examples include individualized education programs (IEPs) for handicapped children and programs such as Chapter 1 that target funds using rigid formulas.

Accountability through incentive systems. Incentive systems are designed to provide rewards for specific results. Examples include the English payment-by-results plan, merit schools, performance-based accreditation, and teacher merit pay. These incentive systems have, Kirst notes, "been plagued with technical problems and have been resisted by education professionals."

Accountability through reliance on the market. This approach includes approaches ranging from vouchers or tuition tax credits for public and private schools to open enrollment within a public school district. The underlying philosophy assumes that if parents are provided with choice, schools will be directly accountable for their results. Because consumers will be free to leave poorer-performing schools, these schools will be required either to improve or to close.

Accountability through changing the locus of authority or control of schools. The key to this approach is the assumption that by changing those who control education policy, schools will become more accountable. Examples include parent advisory councils, school-based management, and state takeovers of local school districts. Whatever the mechanism, Kirst suggests, "the assumption is that schools are accountable to some groups but not to others, and that educational improvement lies in changing the political process so that different groups are favored."

Accountability through changing professional roles. Recently, some districts have adopted professional accountability systems similar to those used by universities when granting tenure. In Toledo, Ohio, for instance, experienced teachers are asked to review and help colleagues who are judged to be very ineffective by their peers. Another example is the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards, which will begin certifying outstanding teachers in 1993. Two-thirds of the Board is made up of teachers.

Any of these six accountability methods, alone or in combination, may be adopted by a school board.

tion to the community about the district's performance is an obligation. The school board and administration believe that community support depends on regular and dependable information. When results are good, information is distributed with pride; when results are bad, information distribution is seen as an opportunity to enlist community support for corrective action.

For example, the Minnesota accountability program, according to a background paper prepared for the OERI State Accountability Study Group, is based on the assumption that

> citizens in each school district in Minnesota will demand and pay for the best possible education if they are provided with an opportunity to participate and if they are provided accurate data, regarding results, on which to base decisions.

- Accountability can facilitate problem solving.

  Districts that promote accountability maintain formal procedures for collecting, analyzing, disseminating, and responding to information. School boards and district personnel routinely discuss the information and use it to formulate short- and long-range action plans.

- Accountability systems provide school boards with an accurate measure of students' success.

  Districts that promote accountability are only somewhat concerned about comparing themselves against their neighbors. They tend to have a larger frame of reference—including comparisons among similar schools and districts, as well as comparisons with appropriate state and national averages. Most important, they look at historical data to measure their own progress over time.

The next chapter discusses a variety of strategies for assessing school systems. It also suggests some ways school districts can use assessment to develop a system of accountability. ■

Chapter 2

The Basics of Accountability: Indicators, Assessment, and Accountability Systems

It is important to understand three common terms widely used by educators and those interested in educational accountability. These terms are *indicators, assessment,* and *accountability systems.*

Indicators

All accountability systems are based on indicators. In a recent guide for policymakers, Jeannie Oakes defined an indicator as "a statistic about the educational system that reveals something about its performance or health." By their choice of indicators, policymakers determine *who* will be accountable, *for what* and *to whom.*

Educational indicators are statistics, but not all statistics are effective indicators.

Educational indicators are statistics, but not all statistics are effective indicators. To be an effective component of decision making, educational indicators should:

1. Have a reference point or clear basis for comparison.
2. Measure what is actually taught or considered important for students to know.
3. Provide information that is relevant to policy.
4. Allow for fair comparisons.
5. Maximize the usefulness of data collected, while minimizing the burden of collecting it.

The importance of reference points. It is more helpful to compare results over time (as trends), with other comparable groups, or against the goals and purposes of the school or system. For example, suppose a school board conducted a survey of parents and asked the following question:

How satisfied do you feel with the academic preparation of your child at Madison High School?

_____Very Satisfied _____Satisfied

_____Dissatisfied _____Very dissatisfied

Now imagine that the results of the survey show that of 1,000 families surveyed, 800 responded as illustrated in Figure 2-1.

Figure 2-1

1990-91 Parent Satisfaction with Academic Quality of Madison High School

Category	Number	Percent
Very satisfied	200	25%
Satisfied	400	50%
Dissatisfied	100	12.5%
Very dissatisfied	100	12.5%
	800	100%

From this information, it appears that most parents (75 percent) are either very satisfied or satisfied with the academic program at Madison High School. But before a school board member can interpret the results, they must be put into context. For example, comparison of parent responses over three years (see Figure 2-2), shows increasing dissatisfaction among parents with the quality of the academic curriculum at Madison High School.

Measuring what is actually taught or considered important for students to know. One of the biggest complaints educators register about most standardized tests is that they do not measure what students are actually being taught. For any accountability system to be effective, it must ensure that the tests that measure student performance include skills and content covered in the curriculum.

Figure 2-2

Three-Year Trend in Parent Satisfaction with Academic Quality of Madison High School

1988-89 thru 1990-91

Category	88-89	89-90	90-91
Very satisfied	50%	35%	25%
Satisfied	40%	45%	50%
Dissatisfied	5%	10%	12.5%
Very dissatisfied	5%	10%	12.5%
	100%	100%	100%

When the state of Arizona, for example, examined why scores on its statewide assessments were slipping, one of the first steps was to compare what was tested with what was being taught. The results, said Lois Easton, Director of the Goals for Excellence Program, were startling: only 26 percent of the information in the state's curriculum was actually tested in the standardized tests the state was using.

Accountability is a blunt tool unless policymakers, educators and the public have information that allows them to determine the likely sources of a problem and find clues about how to fix it. *(OERI State Accountability Study Group)*

Unless the standardized tests that measure student performance include skills and content covered in the curriculum, schools will be held accountable for things they are not actually doing. When districts choose a student assessment method—whether it is a standardized test, a portfolio, or a writing sample—they need to ensure that they are testing the things they believe are important for their students to learn.

Indicators must be relevant to policy. "Accountability is a blunt tool unless policymakers, educators and the public have information that allows them to determine the likely sources of a problem and find clues about how to fix it," noted the OERI State Accountability Study Group.

As NSBA President Martha Fricke noted in her testimony to a Senate committee:

> In terms of student performance most school districts and school sites already have a fairly good idea as to how well they are doing. Although not perfect measures, SRA, ACT, and SAT exams, college admissions, and the opinions of local employers do provide the schools with substantial information. For many low-achieving schools, the utility of a report card is not in finding yet other ways to measure or compare the low performance of their students. For these schools, a more useful report card would provide indicators that would also allow them to compare causes, program alternatives, and resources.

Indicators must provide fair comparisons. Even on the first day of kindergarten, some students arrive at school with more advantages than other children. A wealth of evidence indicates that such factors as parents' level of education, family income, mobility, and per-pupil spending can dramatically affect student performance.

One of the biggest controversies confronting educational policymakers is making the decision of whether or not schools should be compared. If so, should they be compared with:

- Past performance
- Other similar schools
- National norms
- District or state goals?

There is no consensus on how to handle the question of fair reporting, but there are a number of different reporting methods currently in use. The state of California reports achievement data in "comparison bands"—the 160 schools across the state most similar to any particular school in demographic data. In South Carolina, results are also reported in a way that compares an individual school's performance with that of other schools having students with similar demographic characteristics.

Many educators argue strenuously that comparing schools or districts is an inherently inaccurate and unfair proposition. But, as ETS President Gregory Anrig notes, the American public "loves a horse race."

Given that, some educators now suggest that a reporting system that provides some reference points for comparison is the only way to help the public understand the impact of demographics on student achievement. Others worry, however, that this type of reporting can institutionalize lower expectations for poor or minority students.

EXAMPLES OF INDICATORS

Indicators of results

Graduation/dropout rates

Teacher, student attendance

Student writing samples

Achievement and competency test scores

Students' problem-solving skills

Participation in arts and extracurricular activities

SAT/ACT scores

Student status after high school

Employer satisfaction

Progress toward state goals

Course enrollments (in advanced placement, foreign languages, sciences, arts)

Percent of students meeting state university entrance requirements

Indicators about policy

Amount and value of homework

Class size

Placement in academic tracks

Average teacher salary

Teacher qualifications

Per-pupil spending

Implementation of state reforms

Indicators about context

Community support and wealth

Student characteristics of race, wealth, language, parents' education

Availability of instructional resources, including technology

Ability of the school system to attract talented teachers—including data demonstrating the effectiveness of schools of education

Progress made by social service agencies to help school children in such areas as health, nutrition, family counseling, etc.

Progress made by the business community to contribute resources, design part-time jobs to encourage school retention, and to enable (and encourage) employees to spend time assisting in the education of their children.

One of the key questions involved with any accountability system is how to measure performance. That requires some form of assessment.

Assessment

One of the key questions involved with any accountability system is how to measure performance. That requires some form of assessment—usually achievement or performance testing.

Most districts rely heavily on multiple-choice standardized tests as measures of student achievement. A recent study by FairTest, a Boston-based advocacy group, found that U.S. public schools administered 105 million standardized tests to 39.8 million students in the 1986-87 school year—an average of more than 2.5 standardized tests per student per year.

Why is there such reliance on standardized testing? Some supporters of testing say that it is an efficient and fair way to achieve the purposes for which grading and other traditional assessment procedures were designed. But others argue that standardized testing meets another need. "Mass assessment," said Grant Wiggins in a 1989 article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, "resulted from legitimate concern about the failure of schools to set clear, justifiable, and consistent standards to which they would hold its graduates and teachers accountable."

Yet there is now considerable evidence that standardized testing may not be doing the job it

has been called on to do. Critics charge that standardized tests:

(a) measure the wrong skills

(b) distort classroom instruction

(c) falsely reassure parents

(d) discriminate against minority students

(e) do all of the above.

Measuring the wrong skills. Representatives from the National Council of Teachers of English, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, and the National Assessment of Educational Progress all have argued that standardized testing that emphasizes basic skills has led teachers to neglect activities that help students develop analytical and problem-solving skills. In *High School*, Ernest Boyer observed:

> The pressure is on to teach the skills that can be counted and reported. As one teacher said, "We are so hung up on reporting measured gains to the community on nationally normed tests that we ignore teaching those areas where it can't be done."

Even the Scholastic Aptitude Test, the quintessential multiple-choice examination, is being revised to include more higher-order thinking skills. ETS has adopted revisions that will require students to read longer texts, complete essay questions, and record their answers on math questions that do not provide multiple-choice responses. (See Sidebar: "Sample Revised SAT Question")

SAMPLE REVISED SAT QUESTION

This is a sample essay question proposed for the revised Scholastic Aptitude Test:

Consider carefully the following quotation and the assignment below it.

Then plan and write your essay as directed.

"The more things change, the more they stay the same." Assignment: To what extent do you agree or disagree with this familiar saying? In formulating your response, consider how you might apply the saying to a field such as history, literature, art, music, architecture, science, psychology, medicine, education or current affairs.

Distorting classroom instruction. There is considerable research that the content of the standardized test is likely to *become* the curriculum. A 1985 Rand Corporation study by Linda Darling-Hammond and Arthur E. Wise found that when teachers believe that they must produce high test scores, they will teach the precise content of the tests, rather than the underlying concepts. They also found that teachers taught skills in the same format as they appeared on the test—rather than as they would be used in the real world. (Essay exams, for example, were used significantly less in districts that emphasized "minimum competency" basic skills testing.)

Researcher Harriet Tyson-Bernstein found one school district with fourth-grade language arts objectives that included understanding the difference between metaphors and similes. "But the students don't get to read any poetry," she says. "Instead, they memorize definitions that will later appear on the test."

Falsely reassuring parents. As testing has become an increasingly high-stakes exercise, some observers have noted what they call the "Lake Wobegone" effect, named after Garrison Keillor's fictional town where "the women are strong, the men are good looking, and all the children are above average." Recently, physician John Cannell requested standardized test scores from all 50 states. He discovered that every state in the country claims its students are above the national average.

Some test publishers update their norms only when they create a new edition of the test. Until that occurs, students taking the test are evaluated against a standard that may be several years old—thus enabling districts to claim their students are doing better than they actually are.

Teachers may devote more time to test-taking skills if they believe that test results are critical. And there are even cases where teachers or entire schools have resorted to cheating to raise scores. As George Madaus, director of the Center for the Study of Testing, Evaluation, and Education Policy, has observed, "If it's important enough, people are going to find ways to get kids over the hurdle of the tests. The school will look better, but the skill levels will not necessarily be going up."

As an article in the August 28, 1990, *School Board News* points out, statewide or national tests can provide strong incentives to teach to the test, "especially when reform measures, such as the plan enacted in Kentucky, tie performance on assessment exams with rewards and punishments (including dissolving the local school board).

"Given the new teaching innovations and technology available to schools for individualized learning," the story continues, "this is not the time to unduly narrow curriculum" through reliance on rigid testing as the primary indicator of student achievement.

Discriminating against minorities. In an article in the New Jersey School Boards Association's *School Leader*, Jessica Weber talks about factors that affect test scores. It is, she says, a "hard fact" that "rich kids tend to get higher test scores than poor kids." In addition, white kids tend to score higher than black or Hispanic kids.

Some argue that the test scores simply reflect the inequality that exists in the society at large. But, as FairTest's D. Monty Neill and Noe J. Medina wrote in an article in *Phi Delta Kappan*, "Biases and inequities certainly exist—but standardized tests do not merely reflect their impact; they compound them."

Before adopting any assessment program, school board members should ask these questions:

- How reliable is the test?
- Does it measure what we want it to?
- Will this test provide a valid measure of what we want our schools to do?
- What will we do with the information when we get it?
- Will improving scores on this test improve education in our district?
- Will the money we spend on testing divert financial resources that might have otherwise gone into improving curriculum or instruction?

A BASIC GLOSSARY OF TESTING TERMS

According to the National PTA, here are some basic terms related to standardized testing.

There are two types of standardized tests—**achievement tests**, designed to measure what a child has learned in a subject, and **aptitude tests**, which measure skills and abilities. The American College Test is an achievement test. The Scholastic Aptitude Test is an aptitude test.

Norm-referenced tests show how specific students are doing compared with a representative sample of similar students from the school district, the state or the nation. **Criterion-referenced tests** focus on what a student knows rather than how that student compares with others.

Reliability refers to the degree of agreement between test scores that ought to be the same. For example, if you give the same child the same reading aptitude tests on two succeeding days, the scores ought to be pretty close. Reliability is never perfect; there are too many variables, including what a child ate for breakfast that morning. Most test publishers provide information about test reliability.

If a test is **valid**, on the other hand, it measures what it purports to measure. For example, for an achievement test to be valid, it has to ask questions that cover what children have had the opportunity to learn or already know.

Percentiles are different from percentages. A student who gets 45 of 50 questions right would have a 90 percent correct score. That score does not indicate how a particular student did in comparison with other students. A student who scores in the 90th percentile performed as well or better than 90 percent of all students taking the test.

Grade equivalent scores are reported as two numbers separated by a decimal point. The first number stands for grade in school, the second for a 10th of a year. It represents a performance level that is typical of students in that grade at that time of year. A GE score of 5.5, for example, would mean the student scored about as well as the average student who is in the fifth month of fifth grade. (It's important to remember that the GE represents the average—not the high or low scorers.)

A **standard** score is a number between one and nine. Four, five or six are average; seven through nine are above average; and one through three are below average.

—Adapted from "Plain Talk About Tests," published by the National PTA in cooperation with Educational Testing Service. To obtain copies, contact the National PTA, 700 North Rush Street, Chicago, IL 60611; (312) 787-0977.

An appropriate and well designed accountability system is within the reach of every school district.

Accountability systems

Accountability is the process of taking stock—trying to determine what has been accomplished and what remains to be done. Accountability also implies responsibility. Someone or some group in the district has to accept the challenge of school improvement once the problem—which may or may not reside within the school—is identified.

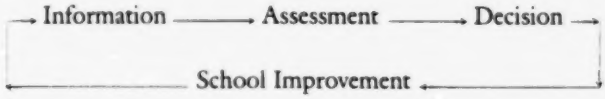
An effective accountability system has three components:

- Regular information collection.
- Evaluation of that information.
- A plan of action for school improvement.

Once action is taken, the system will again collect information and evaluate it. Thus, an effective accountability system should lead to continuous efforts at improvement. (See Figure 2-3)

Figure 2-3

Elements of an Accountability System



When correctly designed, an accountability system can provide valuable information for school boards and administrators to use in making decisions to improve instruction. Moreover, an appropriate and well designed accountability system is within the reach of every school district.

Of course, any district accountability system will operate within the context of federal and state accountability measures. Chapter 3 discusses accountability measures at the national level; Chapter 4 outlines state initiatives. ■

Chapter 3

Accountability at the National Level

From the "Wall Chart" to proposals for national achievement testing, the 1980s were marked by a number of efforts to provide indicators of educational progress. Many developed after the publication of *A Nation At Risk*, when public attention was focused on the need to find out what American students did ... and did not ... know.

U.S. Department of Education initiatives have provided a strong impetus for developing a national educational indicator system. As early as 1982, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) consulted with a number of prominent educators and requested them to help NCES develop a list of measures by which the nation could gauge the condition of education. Out of those consultations, NCES formulated a basic structure for a national indicator system—including measures of student outcomes, competence and attitudes of teachers, school environment, and community context. NCES data, now published in *Indicators of Education Status and Trends*, are intended to provide a broad national perspective on education over time.

A more controversial attempt to formulate a national indicator system is the U.S. Secretary of Education's annual "Wall Chart." Each year, the "Wall Chart" presents a list of statistics for each state. They include:

- SAT and ACT scores
- graduation rates
- per-pupil expenditures
- pupil/teacher ratios
- student population characteristics.

Each year, the "Wall Chart" makes headlines across the country. And each year, educators respond that the indicators on the chart are inappropriate measures of student achievement, allow for unfair comparisons between states, and provide too little information for the public to make informed judgments about what students are doing.

One of the results of the "Wall Chart" controversy has been renewed efforts to develop other, more reliable indicators of educational progress. The Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education, for example, restructured the format of the annual *Condition of Education* to focus on educational indicators. The National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences published two books on educational indicators. The National Science Foundation has funded projects by the RAND Corporation, the University of Wisconsin, and others to develop indicators of educational progress in mathematics and science education.

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) established a State Education Assessment Center to generate and disseminate recommendations designed to improve the collection of national and state-by-state educational statistics.

CCSSO is currently developing a comprehensive set of indicators, shown in Figure 3-1. Each year, the State Education Assessment Center publishes *State Education Indicators*, an annual report outlining the indicators and measures developed to date. The following list offers school board members suggestions of the kinds of educational indicators that might be collected and reported at the local level.

In addition to the movement toward developing a set of national education indicators, there are also a number of proposals for some sort of national assessment. "There are as many conceptions of what a national test might be as there are people and groups," said Marshall Smith, dean of the graduate school of education at Stanford University. Some of the proposals include:

- The National Center for Education and the Economy, working with the Learning Research and Development Center, has proposed that all students should be required to pass a mastery exam at age 16. The exam would rely heavily on alternative measures of assessment, including portfolios and performance exams, which have not been used on a large scale.
- The National Governors Association has appointed a National Education Goals Panel chaired by Governor Roy Romer of Colorado.

Figure 3-1

CCSSO Indicators

INDICATOR	MEASURE
SCHOOL OUTCOMES	
Attendance	% attending/enrolled
High school graduates	% graduating
GED	% awarded/cohort
Achievement in	
• Reading	
• Math	
• Science	
• Social Studies	
• English	
in primary, elementary, intermediate, and secondary grades	Performance on NAEP
POST-SCHOOL OUTCOMES	
Job placement	Students' plans
Post-secondary schooling	Enrollments
Military	Enlistments
Civic involvement	% voting
Attitudes	Student follow-up surveys Parent-employer surveys
SCHOOL CONTEXT	
Demographic	
Size	Total population
Structure	Urban/suburban/rural
Average education	Median school years completed
Economic status	Per capita income
Civic involvement	% adults voting
Resources	
Wealth	Per-pupil assessed valuation
Readiness	Preschool enrollments
Student population	% disadvantaged % limited English % handicapped % private/home-school enrolled
SCHOOL POLICIES AND PRACTICES	
Instructional time	Number of days required Number of hours required % engaged instructional time % in core subjects (reading, English, math)

INDICATOR	MEASURE
Instructional program	
Is kindergarten required?	
Graduation requirements	Total Carnegie units • college bound • vocational • general
Advanced Courses	Courses offered Honors by subject area AP by subject area
Effective schooling	
Instructional leadership	Professional development for school administrators
Safe and orderly environment	Rate of incidents of vandalism per school
Home/school relations	Proportion of schools with PTOs or average # of volunteer hours
Teacher quality	Competency test required
Teacher preparation	Class units required Practice teaching required Required staff development program
Teacher characteristics	
Level of education	% advanced degree
Level of experience	# years teaching
Classroom performance	To be determined
RESOURCE ALLOCATION	
Expenditures	Per-pupil expenditures Teacher salaries Instructional materials
Effort	Index of expenditures for education in relation to other government expenditures
PARTICIPATION POLICIES	Age level of mandatory attendance

The purpose of the panel is to set up a credible assessment plan to measure the progress of the nation's students in achieving the standards set out in the National Education Goals. The assessment, which will extend through the year 2000, will rely both on existing indicators and on yet-to-be-developed indicators of educational achievement. The panel is committed to developing indicators that

—are readily understandable by everyone

—will not cause negative comparisons between and among states

—permit valid international comparisons to measure U.S. students' success against the academic achievement in other parts of the world.

- A group called Educate America, headed by former New Jersey Governor Tom Kean, proposed a series of national achievement tests for high school seniors.
- The President's Educational Policy Advisory Committee has advocated the creation of both national standards for student performance and national tests to measure that performance.
- Smith himself proposed national curriculum goals. At a meeting of the American Educational Research Association, he argued that the goals would lead to changes in teacher preparation as well as classroom instruction.
- The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is being revised. In both the 1990 and 1992 testing cycles, NAEP will release data for individual states, as well as on how students are performing nationally.

But whatever form a national assessment might take, it appears that there is strong—and growing—support for some type of large-scale national assessment. The Gallup Poll on American Education offers some insights into public sentiment on this subject. In 1989 (the last time the question was asked), 73 percent of respondents said they would favor some type of national high-school-graduation examination. In that same year, the Gallup poll also asked Americans whether schools should:

- conform to national achievement standards and goals (70 percent agreed)
- use a standardized national curriculum (69 percent agreed)
- use standardized national testing programs to measure the academic achievement of students (77 percent agreed).

In early 1990, Ernest Boyer speculated on why national tests might be gaining in popularity: "I think that for the first time America is more preoccupied with national results than local school control."

NSBA Executive Director Thomas A. Shannon pointed out the inherent conflict in any proposal for national assessment in a September 11, 1990, article in *School Board News*. On the one hand, he points out, any national assessment program will have enormous influence on the curriculum that is taught in school districts across the country.

> To the extent that the tests and other techniques used in this assessment program are comprehensive and detailed, they will drive the development of the curriculum even more. If the results of the tests are used to reward or punish schools or school districts through, for example, allocation of money or the ousting of principals, superintendents, or school boards, the assessment's control over the writing of the curriculum will become complete.

A dichotomy arises when the push toward nationalization of the curriculum, which ineluctably will result from a strong and effective national assessment effort, feels the pull toward localism of instructional decision making at the local school community level. *(Thomas A. Shannon, NSBA Executive Director)*

This drive toward a national curriculum, however, is in direct conflict with the "Jeffersonian Compact" approved by the President and the nation's governors at the Education Summit. A central feature of new thinking on education reform, Shannon points out,

> is greater emphasis on local determination of instructional programming by parents, teachers,

and others in each local school community under local districtwide and state governance policies.

The dichotomy arises when the push toward nationalization of the curriculum, which ineluctably will result from a strong and effective national assessment effort, feels the pull toward localism of instructional decision making at the local school community level.

A key challenge for decision makers at the local, state, and national level will be to balance these competing forces. One of the critical questions facing local school boards will be to create their own locally developed assessment programs in the context of state and national assessments.

A national assessment program is still very much in its infancy. A number of states, however, have adopted comprehensive and innovative statewide accountability programs. The next chapter outlines some of their efforts. ■

Chapter 4

Sample State Accountability Systems

As Chapter 1 outlined, a number of states have already instituted comprehensive accountability programs. This chapter outlines state accountability efforts in three states: California, Connecticut, and South Carolina. California has the most comprehensive school-level database in the nation. Connecticut is experimenting with the development of innovative assessment strategies, including portfolios of student work. South Carolina combines assessment with an incentive system that is designed to encourage school improvement.

California's School Report Card

California, with its long history of innovative educational policy, has been a leader in developing a system of accountability for educational progress. In 1972, the statewide student achievement testing program—the California Assessment Program (CAP)—was established. The standardized CAP permitted cross-school comparisons for the first time. CAP provides information on the academic achievement of students in public schools at selected grade levels—currently grades 3, 6, 8, and 12. CAP scores are reported in "comparison bands"—the 160 schools across the state whose students are most similar in demographic background.

In 1984, the state began sending each school an annual report including CAP scores, scores of similar schools, enrollment in certain courses, dropout rates, SAT scores, and statewide goals for achievement. Districts were asked to set their own targets and establish improvement strategies to meet explicit goals for improvement.

The annual reports gave schools and districts the detailed information they needed to reinforce educational reforms. Even more important, they helped establish credibility with California voters. Citizens had a mechanism for seeing *what* the schools were trying to achieve, and also had a reliable measure of *how well* schools were doing in meeting those goals. This new climate eventually set the stage for Proposition 98, the school funding constitutional amendment approved by the voters in 1988, which infused millions of dollars into the school system.

Proposition 98 requires California school boards to prepare and issue an annual School Accountability Report Card for each elementary school and high school. Each School Accountability Report Card must include, but is not limited to, an assessment of each of the following school conditions:

1. Student achievement in and progress toward meeting reading, writing, arithmetic, and other academic goals
2. Progress toward reducing dropout rates
3. Estimated expenditures per student and types of services funded
4. Progress toward reducing class sizes and teaching loads
5. Any assignment of teachers outside their subject areas of competence
6. Quality and currency of textbooks and other instructional materials
7. The availability of qualified personnel to provide counseling and other student support services
8. Availability of qualified substitute teachers
9. Safety, cleanliness and adequacy of school facilities
10. Adequacy of teacher evaluations and opportunities for professional improvement
11. Classroom discipline and climate for learning
12. Teacher and staff training and curriculum improvement programs
13. Quality of instruction and leadership.

An example of one part of a School Accountability Report Card is included as Figure 4-1.

Connecticut: Innovations in Student Assessment

Chapter 3 outlined many of the concerns about standardized tests, which typically form the basis of any accountability program. In Connecticut, a

Figure 4-1

School Accountability Report Card

Student Achievement **Example**

Student Achievement

Tables 3 through 5 show the performance of Flag Elementary's third and sixth graders on the California Assessment Program (CAP) since 1983-84. The CAP tests third and sixth graders in reading and mathematics. Table 3 shows our rankings both in relation to the state average and in relation to comparison schools—that is, schools with student bodies similar to Flag Elementary's. The tables show that:

- Last year, our performance was about even with the statewide average at both grade levels tested and in both reading and mathematics.
- We have generally ranked higher than about two-thirds of our comparison schools.
- Our growth in reading performance at the third grade level has been close to the state as a whole over the past five years.

— Table 3. —

Performance of Third and Sixth Grade Students on California Assessment Program, Flag Elementary School.

	Sixth Grade: Reading				Sixth Grade: Mathematics			
	Actual Scores		Ranked Against		Actual Scores		Ranked Against	
Year	School	State Average	State as a Whole	Comparison Schools	School	State Average	State as a Whole	Comparison Schools
1983-84	247	249	49%	72%	264	261	52%	79%
1984-85	250	253	49%	74%	266	264	51%	78%
1985-86	258	260	49%	74%	270	268	51%	78%
1986-87	257	260	48%	73%	271	270	52%	80%
1987-88	263	265	49%	76%	273	270	52%	79%
1988-89	2__	2__	49%	76%	2__	2__	52%	80%
Growth								
5—Year	+__	+__			+__	+__		
1—Year	+__	+__			+__	+__		

	Third Grade: Reading				Third Grade: Mathematics			
	Actual Scores		Ranked Against		Actual Scores		Ranked Against	
Year	School	State Average	State as a Whole	Comparison Schools	School	State Average	State as a Whole	Comparison Schools
1983-84	265	268	49%	72%	277	274	52%	79%
1984-85	271	274	49%	74%	280	278	51%	78%
1985-86	278	280	49%	74%	285	283	51%	78%
1986-87	279	282	48%	73%	288	285	52%	80%
1987-88	280	282	49%	76%	284	281	52%	79%
1988-89	2__	2__	49%	76%	2__	2__	52%	80%
Growth								
5—Year	+__	+__			+__	+__		
1—Year	+__	+__			+__	+__		

Figure 4-2

Connecticut's Common Core of Learning Model

Attributes and Attitudes

Self-Concept	Interpersonal Relations
Motivation and Persistence	Sense of Community
Responsibility and Self-Reliance	Moral and Ethical values
Intellectual Curiosity	

Skills and Competencies

Reading	Quantitative Skills
Writing	Reasoning and Problem Solving
Speaking, Listening and Viewing	Learning Skills

Understandings and Applications

The Arts	Literature
Careers and Vocations	Mathematics
Cultures and Languages	Physical Development and Health
History and Social Sciences	Science and Technology

major effort is underway to develop "performance-based" assessments of student achievement.

The assessments are based on Connecticut's Common Core of Learning, which portrays a standard for the educated high school graduate. (See Figure 4-2.) The new statewide assessment will focus on integrating knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and will employ principles of active and collaborative learning.

Students will be required, as a demonstration of competence, to frame problems, collect data, and analyze, integrate, interpret, and report findings to real audiences. A sample of the kinds of tasks to be required of students is listed in Figure 4-3. The demonstrations of proficiencies vary from using scientific equipment, designing an experiment, and producing a brochure to repairing a small engine. Results of the Mastery Test for each of the 169 towns in Connecticut are released to the press each year.

Connecticut also has developed new methods for public reporting of indicators of achievement. Instead of reporting information in long columns of numbers printed in agate type, the state education department has experimented with reporting methods that present information in a way that is more understandable by the general public. An example of one such report is shown in Figure 4-4.

South Carolina's Incentive Plan

In 1984, under the leadership of former Governor Richard Riley, the South Carolina state legislature passed its landmark Education Improvement Act. Major features of the reform included:

- For students, expanded remedial education services, more aid to gifted and talented students, half-day programs for four-year-olds and new equipment for vocational education;
- for staff, inservice training and new recruitment and retention efforts with college loans and guaranteed beginning teacher salaries that are average for the southeast.

The state established a semi-autonomous Division of Public Accountability, with local and state oversight committees, high school exit exams, a report card system, and state authority to declare school districts "educationally impaired" if they failed to meet standards. Coupled with the accountability system are a series of performance incentive bonuses for teachers, principals, and schools.

South Carolina's School Incentive Rewards Program (SIRP) rewards schools for gains in student achievement and for meeting student and teacher attendance criteria. The primary criterion of the program is student achievement gain—measured using a matched-longitudinal comparison of test scores in reading and mathematics from the State Testing Program and the Basic Skills Assessment Program. Schools meeting the achieve-

Figure 4-3

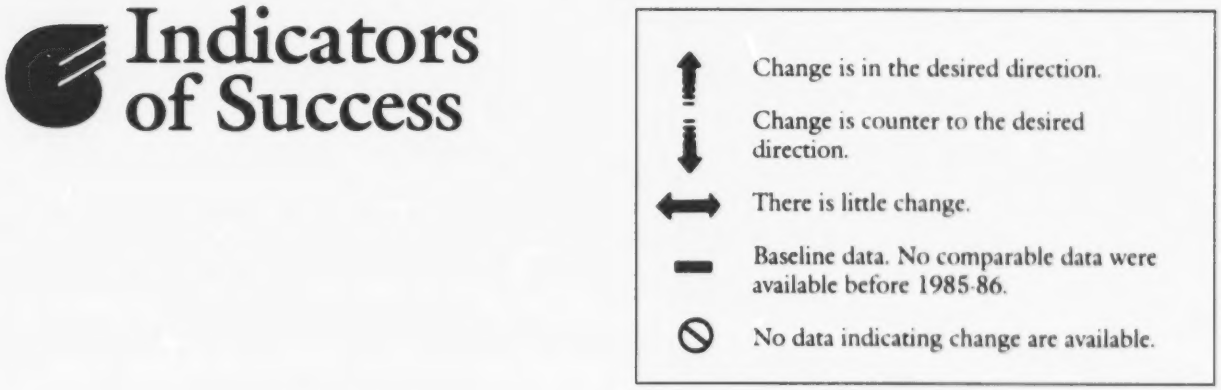
Performance Testing in Connecticut

Subject	Year	Grades Tested	Performance Task	Whole Sample or Subsample	Administration Time	When scored? (After self-administered testing or during other-administered testing)
Science	1984-85	4, 8, 11	Use scientific apparatus: weigh, measure, focus microscope, etc.	Subsample	1 class period	During
		8, 11	Design and conduct an experiment	Subsample	1 class period	During
Foreign Language	1986-87	9-12	Write a letter	Whole	1 class period	After
French			Speak to an interviewer	Subsample	1 class period	During
German						
Italian						
Spanish						
Industrial Arts and Technology Education	1986-87					
Drafting		12	Produce a series of drawings	Subsample	3 1/4 hours	During
Graphic Arts		12	Produce a brochure	Subsample	5 1/2 hours	During
Small Engines		12	Service and repair small engines	Subsample	3 1/4 hours	During

For information, contact Joan Boykoff Baron, Connecticut State Department of Education, P.O. Box 2219, Room 342, Hartford, CT 06145. (203-566-3847)

Figure 4-4

Connecticut's State-level Indicator Reporting


Indicators of Success
Change is in the desired direction.
Change is counter to the desired direction.
There is little change.
Baseline data. No comparable data were available before 1985-86.
No data indicating change are available.

Status	Indicators of Change	Commentary
▬	The number of handicapped students placed into competitive employment	In 1985-86, 1,805 of the 2,184 clients rehabilitated in programs supported by the Division of Rehabilitation Services were placed into competitive employment.
↑	The proportion of vocational education program completers who obtain a full-time job related to their training, pursue additional education, or enter the military	In 1985, 70.9 percent of all vocational education program completers either obtained a full-time job related to their training (24.3%); pursued additional education (43.5%); or entered the military (3.1%). This figure is up from 68.9 the previous year.
⊘	The number of handicapped students graduating high school and placed into postsecondary training	No data are available on the number of handicapped students graduating high school who are placed in postsecondary training. Data will be available for the 1986-87 school year.
▬	The number of handicapped students in vocational education programs	19,457 handicapped students, constituting 12 percent of the total, were enrolled in vocational programs in the local public school districts in 1985-86. These data reestablish a baseline for this indicator, as the prior data were found to be significantly underreported.
↑	Percentage of public high school students enrolled in the vocational-technical schools	The percentage of public high school students enrolled in the vocational-technical schools in 1985 was 7.8. This was 0.1 percentage points above the prior year and 2.2 percentage points above the level of five years ago.
↔	The average score on the general educational development (GED) tests	In 1985, the average scores on the writing skills, social studies, reading, and mathematics sections of the GED test declined while the average increased slightly on the science section. The five components of the GED totaled 245.1 in 1985 compared to 247.3 in 1984.

SOURCE: Connecticut State Department of Education (1986)

ment criterion can then increase their rewards by also meeting the two attendance criteria.

Gain is defined as "the discrepancy between predicted performance based upon prior performance level, and actual achievement." A School Gain Index (SGI) is calculated for each school by determining the mean difference between obtained and predicted scores for individual students in reading and mathematics. An SGI value of 0.0 indicates that the school's actual performance and its predicted performance are equal. A positive SGI value indicates improvement and a negative SGI indicates decline.

Schools compete for awards within five comparison groups, based on the following criteria, all of which influence student achievement but are considered to be beyond the control of the individual school:

- students participating in free lunch programs
- local funding over the required minimum amount
- teachers' educational level beyond the bachelor's degree
- percentage of students meeting the readiness standard on the Cognitive Skills Assessment Battery.

Management experts recognize that one of the keys to making an incentive system work is to set goals that are achievable. In the years since South Carolina adopted the program, more than 60 percent (approximately 630) of the state's 1,000 schools have received recognition at least once. About 40 percent of the schools that are recognized are "repeaters"—that is, they qualify year after year. About one-third of the schools receive some recognition for gains in achievement each year—either a monetary award or an honorable mention.

These are just three of the states that have adopted new accountability systems. Many more states have also adopted some type of accountability program. The next chapter outlines what local districts are doing to improve educational accountability. ■

Chapter 5

Local School Boards and Accountability Systems

Local school boards can—and should—take the leadership in designing accountability systems to improve education in their local school districts. Local leadership is essential because school boards represent the community's point of view about what educational goals are most appropriate.

For example, policymakers at the state or federal level may set a goal that all 9th grade biology students should understand the concept of osmosis.

Local leadership in designing accountability systems is essential because school boards represent the community's point of view about what education goals are most appropriate.

But in a midwestern farming community, the board might decide that the biology curriculum should emphasize agriculture and animal husbandry. In a fishing community, marine biology might receive more emphasis.

Local school districts have the flexibility to adopt a program, evaluate it, and make changes quickly based on the results of the evaluation. In this way, local districts can often serve as catalysts for change in neighboring districts or even throughout the region.

This chapter details what some local school boards are doing to promote accountability in their districts. It also outlines some general trends in local district accountability, based on a survey of NSBA Direct Affiliate members.

Richland, South Carolina—Accountability and Incentives

The Richland School District #1 (enrollment 30,000) illustrates how a local district's policies can stimulate change throughout the state. The accountability system developed in Richland served as the precursor for the South Carolina school improvement program.

In 1980, the school district's director of research and superintendent were inspired by a television program on Japanese productivity to develop a district-level School Productivity Program. The first task was to develop indicators by which the district could measure productivity. A committee of school principals suggested six: improvement in math achievement, improvement in reading achievement, student attendance, teacher attendance, student attitudes, and parent attitudes.

The district decided to base awards and recognition on ***improvement*** in these six categories, rather than on the absolute level of achievement. In that way, schools could compete on a more even basis, regardless of the demographic profile of their student body.

The program also was structured to provide some recognition to a significant number of schools—enough so that the award would be achievable, but not so many that it became meaningless. In the first year, seven schools qualified for the award, which included both monetary incentives and symbolic forms of recognition, including flags. More schools qualified for awards in subsequent years. The "winning" schools were not always the same ones, noted John May, then director of research for the district. "The key to the program lies in the opportunity to recognize many schools," he observes.

Several other districts in the state soon adopted their own version of the Richland plan, and in 1984, it became the basis of the statewide incentive program discussed in Chapter 4.

Wilington, Connecticut—Linking Assessment to Curriculum

The Wilington, Connecticut, schools illustrate one way in which a small system can ensure that its own assessment program is linked to overall curriculum objectives. The school system serves approximately 600 students in grades K-8.

The district's assessment program was developed to conform to Connecticut's Common Core of Learning described in Chapter 4. The district's efforts include three main components:

- classroom instruction that emphasizes higher-order thinking skills
- assessment that emphasizes performance testing
- staff development to help teachers better match curriculum to assessment.

In this small district (75 teachers), teachers are responsible for incorporating the assessment information into classroom lessons. The district provides teachers with one hour per week of release time to evaluate test data and develop improvement plans for individual students and the class as a whole.

Ann Jones, the district's coordinator of special services, works with teachers to interpret test data and use that information as the basis for lesson planning. Information is provided from a variety of different assessments—the Metropolitan Achievement Test, given to students in grades 3, 5, and 7; the Connecticut Mastery Test given in grades 4, 6, and 8; the Degrees of Reading Power test; and the district's own criterion-referenced tests matched to curriculum objectives.

Bowling Green, Kentucky—Participatory Decision-Making and Accountability

Participatory decision-making characterizes the approach to school improvement in the Bowling Green, Kentucky, school district (enrollment 3,675). Each summer, all teachers and the principal of each school spend two inservice days in a retreat reviewing school data, setting goals, and deciding on a method for achieving the goals. The process is conducted separately for each of the system's six elementary schools, its junior high school, and the senior high school.

The process, called the Tellstar method, begins with teachers reviewing results from the Kentucky Essential Skills Test, the California Test of Basic Skills, dropout rates, parent and teacher survey results, attendance data, information on the racial composition of the student body, parent income, percent of students qualifying for free lunch, student mobility, and other demographic data. The discussion focuses on whether actual test scores conform to expected test scores.

The Bowling Green schools use a model based on the Effective Schools and Effective Teaching methods. Teachers from each team or grade level select a team leader. The team leaders meet to discuss what changes should be implemented. Gradually, the school's teachers (principals are allowed to be observers, but not participants in this planning phase) reach a consensus about what the school must do to improve during the coming school year. Superintendent Joel Brown feels there is a definite advantage to having teachers assume the primary responsibility for planning. Since teachers set the stage for the school improvement plans for the coming year, they are more likely to have a stake in the success of the school.

Schools that show little progress in meeting their goals are given additional technical assistance. Since the philosophy of the district is based on equity, no financial incentives are used for schools performing above or below the others.

A number of changes in instruction have resulted from the participatory decision-making process. For example, teachers developed new guidelines for time management that allow them to spend more uninterrupted time on task.

Murphy, Arizona—Using Accountability for Special Populations

The Murphy, Arizona, schools enroll a student population that is predominantly low-income (95 percent), primarily minority (85 percent—approximately 75 percent Hispanic). Like many other districts, Murphy uses a system of goal-setting to plan both the long- and short-term direction for change at the district and building level. The district serves students in grades K-8 in four schools with a total enrollment of 2,500.

The district tests students for achievement using their own district-developed criterion-referenced tests. In Arizona, local school districts set their own goals, drawing on a state-developed list of essential skills in various disciplines.

The superintendent meets with principals to discuss scores and identify areas of weakness or low-performing classes. Principals then consult with their faculties to develop school improvement plans.

The local school board uses assessment data in a variety of ways. In addition to using student achievement results, for example, the board examines the results of the district's counseling services, migrant education, drop-out prevention, bilingual education, and other programs. Task forces of citizens and community members are created to study programs that are not performing optimally.

To keep parents informed, each school distributes

APPROACHES TO ACCOUNTABILITY

What kinds of indicators do school districts use to evaluate educational progress? A survey of NSBA Direct Affiliates revealed that districts use a variety of methods. The most common indicators include the following:

Indicators Of Student Achievement. The one thing most community members want to know—whether they are parents of public-school children or not—is, "Are our students learning what they need to learn?" Districts use the following indicators of student achievement:

- Student achievement test results
  Districts indicated they were much more likely to use norm-referenced tests, designed to allow comparisons with national norms.
- Competency testing
- Graduation and dropout rates
- Student grades
- Promotion and retention rates
- Numbers of students on the honor roll
- Scholarships awarded
- Enrollment in Advanced Placement courses

Indicators Of Student Behavior. Many districts monitor and report on a variety of indicators of student behavior. They include:

- Student attendance
  The most commonly used indicator for student behavior is student attendance.
- Participation in extracurricular activities
- Suspensions and expulsions
- Incidents of vandalism

Indicators Of School Context. Each district is unique. So contextual information, such as student and community demographics and district resources, must be used in conjunction with other indicators to present an accurate portrayal of the circumstances that affect district operations. Districts reported using the following indicators:

- Demographic background
- Student mobility
- Percentage eligible for free and reduced-price lunch
- Number of students enrolled in English as a Second Language programs
- Statistics on student health, including drug and alcohol use, teen pregnancy, etc.
- Statistics on student employment after school

In addition, districts use the following indicators of community demographics:

- Community wealth and income
- Household structures—number of single-parent families, percentage of households with children
- Property values, real estate taxes paid
- Community growth patterns
- U.S. Census Bureau information
- Information from civic associations and businesses

Indicators Of Teacher Quality. The quality of the teaching staff is critical for fully developing students' abilities. Districts use the following indicators:

- Results of teacher evaluation
- Teacher attendance rates
- Educational background and degree status
- Participation on committees and community services as an indicator of teacher commitment
- Teacher awards and honors
- Feedback from parents

Indicators Of Community Support. Community support is an integral component to district success. Districts reported that they use the following indicators of community support:

- Community surveys
  The most common method for assessing community support is through a community survey.
- Informal methods, such as open houses, open forums, etc.

its own newsletter. The district also issues eight newsletters (in both English and Spanish) outlining assessment results.

Paris, Tennessee—Linking Accountability with Staff Development

The accountability system in Paris, Tennessee, a K-6 school district with an enrollment of 1400, links assessment information with staff development. The district uses the Tennessee School Board Model for Effective Planning as a basis for its accountability program.

The annual testing cycle provides one opportunity to work with the teachers from the three elementary schools that make up the district. When the Stanford Achievement Test (mandated by the state for certain grades) results are reported to the district, all teachers at each grade level for each school spend one day meeting with the principal and the supervisor of instruction. Teachers look at the tests on which the students scored lowest to determine whether they match what the school is teaching. If they do not, teachers discuss whether those objectives should be included in the curriculum.

Only those objectives that the school faculty agrees are important are added to the curriculum. Teachers who work during the summer write lesson plans designed to teach those objectives the following year.

The district also bases staff development activities around test score results on objectives that teachers identify as important. Weekly meetings between teachers and principals focus on developing classroom activities that will better help students achieve certain learning goals. ■

Chapter 6

Creating A Local Accountability System

As the previous chapter shows, accountability systems can take many forms and can be adopted by any size district. This chapter discusses the steps school boards should take to develop an accountability system appropriate to their needs—and their budget.

Goal-setting is a critical first step in planning an accountability system. Because assessment eventually drives instruction, districts should first ensure that they have in place a set of educational goals to strive for.

Planning an Accountability System

Goal-setting is a critical first step in planning an accountability system. Because assessment eventually drives instruction, as Chapter 1 explained, districts should first ensure that they have in place a set of educational goals to strive for.

There are a variety of methods for district goal-setting. For example, when the state of Vermont was revising its system for reporting student achievement in writing, the state Commissioner of Education scheduled forums around the state. In an article in the *Michigan School Board Journal*, Commissioner Richard Mills describes the kinds of questions citizens were asked:

- What kind of performance do citizens expect?
- How would they measure it?
- What would they do with the information?
- Should there be consequences for poor performance, or for outstanding performance?

In Indiana, local school districts have been encouraged by the Indiana School Boards Association to conduct local education summits, modeled on the national Education Summit that led to the creation of the National Goals for Education. In this model, leaders representing a wide spectrum of the community meet together to develop district-wide goals.

Other school districts solicit citizen input through community surveys. Then a committee of the school board meets to develop the district's short- and long-range goals, which are then presented to the entire board for approval.

Whatever method is used, goals should be both specific and measurable. Examples include:

- Decrease the dropout rate by 50 percent.
- Reduce teacher absenteeism to an average of 7 days per year.
- Increase minority student participation in Advanced Placement classes by 100 percent in three years.

Once a district has developed its goals, it needs to ensure that there is an information system that can provide accurate and timely information on how well the district is meeting its goals. One interesting method of gathering information for educational improvement, developed by a research team at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is known as the Critical Success Factor (CSF) method.

After a district has developed specific, measurable goals, school board members and the leadership team meet to identify factors critical to the success of every goal. They might include staff, funds, facilities, materials, and time. The process is followed for both district- and school-level goals.

For example, the school board might have identified a goal of reducing the dropout rate by 50 percent. One factor critical to the success of that goal might be an "early warning system" that identifies youth with a high probability of school failure. Such a system would require staff—teachers and counselors. They in turn might need office space, funds for special programs, instructional materials to better meet the needs of at-risk students, and so on.

Armed with that information, the district can see clearly what commitments it must make in order to supply the factors critical to the success of the goal. In many cases, this will lead to a discussion of *priorities*. If the district does not have the money

available to fund the entire dropout-prevention program, for example, which of the CSFs is most critical? Are there other ways to achieve the goal?

Next, the planners will analyze how various goals and their CSFs are related. As a result of these discussions, some CSFs may be combined, revised, or eliminated. During this process, planners will also make a first effort to establish an appropriate measure for each goal and CSF.

The process continues, with board members and school staff continuing to have opportunities to reflect on both their goals and the CSFs they identify. They also can make changes as they become necessary.

The advantages of the CSF approach are considerable. First, everyone on the school board and leadership team is encouraged to think about the time, energy and resources needed to accomplish the specific organizational goals. At the same time, the school board can see where school-level goals and district goals are complementary—and where they might lead to conflict. Potential areas of conflict can be negotiated in advance.

The CSF technique focuses attention on appropriate measures of the necessary inputs as well as school and district educational goals. This will help the district determine the kind of information it will need to evaluate its progress toward meeting its goals.

Choosing an Appropriate Assessment Instrument(s)

Once clear goals have been established, a school board needs to determine the appropriate assessment techniques. If standardized tests are to be used as an indicator of educational achievement, for example, which tests should be used? How should results be reported?

If alternative assessment measures are chosen, school board members must also set out clearly the indicators that will be used and how progress will be measured. It is worth recalling the basic advice that "What you inspect says a lot about what you expect." It may be necessary for school board members to receive additional training in the governance role in assessment and accountability.

Maintaining and Assessing Accountability Information

Accountability systems range from the simplest—attendance slips from teachers recorded by hand—

No one accountability system will be right for all school districts.

to the most complex—computer systems that handle everything from student records to transportation planning. No one system will be right for all school districts. There are, however, some questions that school boards can ask when planning and developing an information system.

1. What does the system need to do? A system designed to provide information for day-to-day instructional decisions would look very different from a system set up primarily to report end-of-year data.
2. How much centralization of data will be encouraged? If the district, for example, is planning a shift to site-based management, a highly decentralized system is important. In that case, a district might want to budget for personal computers for each school to aid in the collection and management of information.
3. How large is the budget for information management? The purchase of a computer, for example, is just part of the cost of moving to a computerized system. Printers, software, supplies, maintenance, and insurance must also be included. It may not be cost-effective, for example, to purchase computer software to tabulate attendance data in a small district that has been keeping records successfully by hand for many years.
4. Do school district staff have the skills necessary to use an information system? What kind of training will be required? School board members, for example, need to learn how to read and use accountability information for planning purposes. Teachers and principals, however, might need to learn how to use information on individual student performance to design a more appropriate instructional program.

Evaluating Results

After the district has adopted an accountability system, it is important to monitor the system to see whether it meets the needs for which it was designed. Here are some questions to ask:

After the district has adopted an accountability system, it is important to monitor the system to see whether it meets the needs for which it was designed.

1. Does the system give policymakers the information they need? If tax-conscious citizens or businesses ask what they get for their taxes, will the information system allow you to give a convincing and persuasive answer?
2. Do central administrative staff and building-level staff members find the system useful and valid?
3. Did the "report card" on the status of the school district's educational goals give an accurate picture of the relative strengths and weaknesses of various schools and programs for the system?
4. Does the reporting system include a way to indicate the responsibilities of parents, the state, the business community, and others in working toward school and district education goals?

Pitfalls to Avoid

In designing an accountability system, school boards should be aware of the following problems that can arise:

1. Test accretion

Most school districts monitor some aspect of student achievement, and most students spend several days each year taking standardized tests. As Chapter 2 noted, the average U.S. student takes an average of 2.5 standardized tests per year.

Today, many teachers and administrators are concerned that school systems and students might be suffering from test burnout: if local, state, and federal assessment practices are at cross-purposes or uncoordinated, high school students in particular can become overburdened with test-taking.

For example, in one school district high school seniors took the SAT, a state minimum competency examination, various advanced placement examinations, the scheduled state achievement test, the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the state criterion-referenced series and as many as four or five midterm and final examinations—all within the space of a few months. When large numbers of students are involved in testing, the curriculum suffers and additional student learning can be severely curtailed.

That is one reason so many educators are now encouraging the development of more "authentic" assessment methods. For example, the state of Vermont is now experimenting with portfolios—collections of student work in writing and mathematics that reflect what students have learned over the course of the year. In Arizona, the math assessment asks students to use what they have learned about scale and proportion to design a playground of the future.

Sharing data on school-level performance can become a useful mechanism for exchanging information among principals and teachers about effective curricular and instructional strategies.

2. Non-comparability

In some states, two neighboring school districts with widely different student populations might administer completely different achievement tests to their students, test different grade levels, and different subject areas. In that case, it is impossible to compare the results of the two districts.

The absence of coordination of testing programs greatly reduces the usefulness of test information for comparison purposes. Even without state leadership in this area, school boards can form accountability system cooperatives and agree to use common tests and indicators. Sharing data on school-level performance can become a useful mechanism for exchanging information among principals and teachers about effective curricular and instructional strategies.

3. Inappropriate use of tests

Today, tests are used for everything from student promotion to teacher evaluation. But not all tests can be used for all purposes.

The classic example is using the SAT to indicate

AN EXAMPLE OF AN "AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT"

In a special issue of the *Phi Delta Kappan* devoted to alternative accountability strategies, Grant Wiggins argues that an authentic test "requires the performance of exemplary tasks." He offers this example of a final exam in economics:

> You are the chief executive officer of an established firm. Your firm has always captured a major share of the market because of good use of technology, understanding of the natural laws of constraint, understanding of market systems, and maintenance of a high standard for your product. However, in recent months your product has become a part of a new trend in public tastes. Several new firms have entered the market and have captured part of your sales. Your product's proportional share of total aggregate demand is continuing to fall. When demand returns to normal, you will be controlling less of the market than before.
>
> Your board of directors has given you less than a month to prepare a report that solves the problems in the short run and the long run. In preparing the report, you should: 1) define the problem; 2) prepare data to illustrate the current situation; 3) prepare data to illustrate conditions one year in the future; 4) recommend actions for today; 5) recommend action over the next year; and 6) discuss where your company will be in the market six months from today and one year from today. The tasks that must be accomplished include:
>
> - deriving formulas for supply, demand, elasticity, and equilibrium
> - preparing schedules for supply, demand, costs, and revenues
> - graphing all work
> - preparing a written evaluation of the current and future situation for the market in general and for your company in particular
> - preparing a written recommendation for your board of directors
> - showing aggregate demand today and predicting what it will be one year hence
> - showing demand for your firm's product today and predicting what it will be one year hence.

student achievement. Although the SAT is designed only to predict the likelihood of freshmen succeeding in their first year of college, it is widely cited by legislators, their staff aides, community leaders, and even school officials as among the most important of indicators of effective schooling.

4. Using student achievement tests to evaluate teachers

Some states are exploring the possibility of using student achievement data in conjunction with their teacher incentive plans. Yet the link between the teacher's talent for teaching and the student's ability to learn can be mediated by a host of issues—school resources, class size, student background, student mobility, and the quality of teaching provided by previous teachers. Perhaps no other issue concerns leaders of teacher professional associations more.

School boards should not use test results to evaluate individual teachers. Test results, however, can and should be used to identify chronic problem areas. A South Carolina education official recently reported the following example of how one district in the state used their report card system to identify such a problem.

At the request of the district superintendent, state officials visited the school district to interpret school-by-school test results. The officials pointed out that seventh-grade students were consistently scoring far below their expected performance in mathematics. Conversations with the mathematics department chairs revealed that teachers traditionally focused on basic math skills throughout the seventh grade. The district changed the curriculum and students did much better the following year.

5. Students' right to privacy

Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina are presently devising data collection systems based on the latest computer technology. This new technology permits local districts to enter and maintain fiscal, personnel, and student records, but also allows the state department of education to have access to those local data bases.

Such a system raises critical issues about students' rights to privacy. Will information about students' religious preferences, psychological conditions, sexual preferences, health, and disciplinary records become accessible? In at least one state (Florida), there is already a pending court case involving a

plaintiff who contends that the proposed centralized data collection system will violate students' rights to privacy.

Before embarking on any new assessment system, school boards need better information on the real costs of assessment. These should include staff and resources required, as well as opportunity costs to students in terms of curriculum narrowing and lost class time.

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6. Additional costs

Assessment is both time-consuming and expensive. Yet very few school districts know the total cost of their assessment systems. Data collection and testing programs are frequently overlapping, competing, and under-utilized.

Before embarking on any new assessment system, school boards need better information on the real costs of assessment. These should include staff and resources required, as well as opportunity costs to students in terms of curriculum narrowing and lost class time.

7. Timeliness

Many states and school districts collect and report data on a cycle that makes it difficult for schools to respond to results by the following academic year. In these cases, school boards are unable to reallocate resources to address problems until two years following the release of the information. For accountability to have any meaning, school districts must work to ensure that assessment results are available during a time frame that responds to district planning cycles. ■

Conclusions

At no time in America's history have calls for accountability in public education been voiced by so many diverse groups. Whether it is a national group proposing national testing or a group of local citizens concerned about how their tax dollars are being spent, local school boards are confronted with an increased need to be accountable for results.

Local school boards will remain at the forefront of the accountability movement. An accountability system designed at the local level can most accurately reflect the needs and requirements of the local school system.

While reliable and pertinent information is necessary for school boards to understand the condition of education in their school systems, information is only an input into the process. The process itself—examining with objectivity and discrimination the quality of education in the schools—is the heart of any accountability system. Equally important, however, is an unshakable commitment to excellence. Every problem identified offers a district an opportunity for growth and improvement. The ultimate goal of an accountability system is to instill a district-wide value system dedicated to learning.

Resources

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Michael W. Kirst, *Accountability: Implications for State and Local Policymakers* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education), 1990.

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Leadership Reports are one of the many benefits of the NSBA Direct Affiliate program. In addition to *Leadership Reports*, school board members and superintendents in NSBA Direct Affiliate school districts receive *School Board News*—the only national newspaper exclusively for school leaders—and NSBA's widely used National Education Policy Network. Individuals from Direct Affiliate districts also may take advantage of substantial discounts on a variety of NSBA meetings, publications and services. Direct Affiliate fees support NSBA's advocacy program in Washington, D.C. and across the nation on behalf of local school districts.

More than 3,000 school districts have benefitted from the Direct Affiliate program since it was established in 1970.

For more information on the *Leadership Reports* or NSBA's Direct Affiliate program, write or call the Direct Affiliate services staff of the National School Boards Association, 1680 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. (703) 838-6722.

about NSBA . . .

The National School Boards Association is located in Alexandria, Virginia, within the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. NSBA is a not-for-profit organization whose primary mission is the general advancement of public education through the unique North American system of representative and participatory government, whereby elementary and secondary school policy is decided by local school board members who are directly accountable to the community. Over 95% are elected, and the remainder are appointed by elected officials.

Federation Members of NSBA are the state associations of local school boards, the Hawaii State Board of Education, and the boards of education in the District of Columbia and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

NSBA promotes the quality of public elementary and secondary schools through services to its Federation Members and local school boards; by increasing school board impact on federal education laws and regulations; and by maintaining liaison with other education organizations and governmental authorities.

In so doing, NSBA represents the interests of school boards before Congress, federal agencies and in court cases relating to education; provides education and training programs for school board members; provides school district management services; and offers to school boards a variety of other services including an annual convention and the Institute for the Transfer of Technology to Education (ITTE).

The NSBA Federal Relations Network, composed of up to three school board members in each Congressional district, plays a major role in NSBA's education advocacy program in Washington, D.C.

Three major publications are produced by NSBA: the award-winning monthly magazine, **The American School Board Journal**; the monthly magazine, **The Executive Educator**, and a fortnightly newspaper, **School Board News**.

Eight constituent groups within the Federation play a significant role in NSBA's efforts to serve Federation Member and school board needs:

- The Council of Urban Boards of Education focuses on the needs of urban school boards.
- The Large District Forum serves the special needs of large but non-urban school districts.
- The Rural and Small District Forum serves rural and small enrollment districts.
- The Federation Member Executive Directors' NSBA Liaison Committee links the top executives within the Federation.
- The Council of School Attorneys focuses on issues of school law.
- The Conference of School Boards Association Communicators serves NSBA and Federation Member communications professionals.
- The Federal Policy Coordinators Network focuses on the administration of federally funded programs.
- The Technology Leadership Network serves as a forum for sharing information about technology in the classroom and school district operations.

NSBA maintains close liaison with other groups, such as the National Caucus of Black School Board Members, National Caucus of Hispanic School Board Members, National Caucus of Young School Board Members, National Association of State Boards of Education, American Association of School Administrators, Forum of Education Organization Leaders (FEOL), Educational Leaders Consortium (ELC), National Governors' Association, National Conference of State Legislatures, and Education Commission of the States.

Founded in 1940, NSBA represents the nation's 97,000 school board members who, in turn, represent the more than 40 million public school children in the U.S., who account for about 90% of all elementary and secondary school students in the nation. About 2,000 local school boards are NSBA Direct Affiliates.

NSBA policy is determined by a 150-member Delegate Assembly composed of active school board members across the country. Translating this policy into action programs is a Board of Directors consisting of 21 members and three **ex-officio** members. The executive director administers NSBA programs, assisted by a professional staff.

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